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ABSTRACT

The Theatre of the Grotesque, a dramatic movement in Italy from 1916 until 1930, grew directly out of Pirandello's concept of "umorismo," the painful laugh accompanying the tragic sense of bewilderment at the incongruities and cruelties of life. Growing first of all from a reaction against positivism and its theatrical counterpart, naturalism, the Theatre of the Grotesque was also an extension of the Crepuscular movement in poetry. Three syndromes which enter grotesque plays in various combinations are aptly expressed in the titles of three of the grotesques: for the marionette syndrome, Rosso di San Secondo's "Oh Marionettes, What Passion!"; for the mirror syndrome, Luigi Antonelli's "The Man Who Met Himself"; and for the multiple reality syndrome, Luigi Pirandello's "Right You Are (If You Think You Are)." These Pirandellian syndromes have continued and have been enriched in the absurdist and existentialist drama which followed the Theatre of the Grotesque. (JM)

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THE THEATRE OF THE GROTESQUE

The Theatre of the Grotesque, which endured in Italy between 1916 and about 1930, was a fad that should have been a movement. As a fad, it developed a series of facile techniques that lent themselves to a playwriting formula: a man pretends to die in order to outlive himself, or a man is given the opportunity to meet himself, or a woman changes character with her clothes. Any quick and easy reshuffling of the usual realms of experience was seized upon as a dramatic device to conjure up "grotesques" in place of the old style comedies and tragedies. Such techniques, however, were potentially meaningful vehicles for conveying the tragic sense of futility that accompanied the first World War and its aftermath. Despite the relative poverty of significant grotesque plays (Pirandello's aside), it was a highly indicative development, paralleling the climate of thought of the time and even prefiguring the tone and devices that were to become central to the drama much later, not only in Italy but elsewhere. Contemporary playwrights such as Beckett, Pinter, Stoppard, Duerrenmatt, Frisch, and Peter Barnes and John Guare, among others, have in a sense rediscovered the spirit of the grotesque. In the time of the Theatre of the Grotesque, perhaps only Luigi Pirandello succeeded in recognizing fully its potential—and he himself is commonly regarded now as a forerunner of much that was to come later.

The term "a grotesque" was first coined by Luigi Chiarelli as a subtitle to his play The Mask and The Face written in 1913 and first produced in 1916. The term calls to mind images of gargoyles and creatures of incongruous configurations. It also suggests Victor Hugo's idea of grotesque drama, incongruously mixing the ugly and the beautiful. Both are relevant. The spirit of the grotesque goes beyond that. It grows directly out of Pirandello's concept

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of "umorismo", the painful laugh that accompanies a tragic sense of bewilderment in the face of a cruel and incongruous life. Such bewilderment grows naturally from the view that life is an absurd farce forcing a tragic, agonizing pain on its participants. The plays, then, become themselves tragic farces. As a play, a grotesque ideally is itself a denial of any imposed form, neither a comedy nor a tragedy, but an experience whose inner life forces the spectator into the same sense of bewilderment as the characters. Absurd juxtapositions produce intense suffering, and the suffering new absurd juxtapositions. In the grotesque, typically, the tragedies and passions of life are almost mechanically fragmented producing a farcial spectacle of suffering characters. Adriano Tilgher defined the grotesque as a dramatic form that proceeds from the contrast between the deliberate constructions humans i pose upon life and the spontaneity of instinct. The spectacle hinges, he says, upon the struggle between the constructions behind which life masquerades and the spontaneity of the life spirit. Similarly, Silvio d'Amico defined the grotesque as a form in which nothing is viewed as real except what we build, piece by piece—this thing, that thing, the other thing (Uno, Nessuno e Centomila as Pirandello's novel would have it)—and life appears as a melancholy farce, in which men are made to recite more or less ignorantly their different parts, poor puppets in the hand of a blind destiny. Early in the development of the movement, d'Amico condemned it as "pseudoartistic, quasi-farcical Grand Guignol," although he later had kinder things to say.

However one might define the "grotesque", there are certain recurring terms: "incongruity", "irony", "tragic farce", "fragmentation", "masquerade", "marionette" or "puppet", for example. All of these take on coherence in Pirandello's concept of "umorismo", for they assume meaning in connection with the sensation of painful laughter produced by the sight of tragic incongruities in life. They were also amply illustrated in some of Pirandello's earlier novels, most particularly his The Late Mattia Pascal. It would probably be

wrong, however, to attribute to Pirandello the theorist and the novelist the total inspiration for the movement. Pirandello himself was responding to many of the same forces that provoked the grotesque response in such playwrights as Luigi Chiarelli, Pier Maria Rosso di San Secondo, Massimo Bontempelli, Luigi Antonelli, Enrico Cavacchioli, Fausto Maria Martini, and others. Provocation and precedent can also be found elsewhere.

The Theatre of the Grotesque grew first of all from a reaction against Positivism and its theatrical counterpart, Naturalism. The dominance of middle class Naturalistic drama was deeply entrenched in Italy, and even the grand Neo-romanticism of d'Annunzio and Benelli had left it unshaken. Some playwrights such as Enrico Annibale Butti and Roberto Bracco had launched a quiet revolution against photographic realism with plays that suggested a further dimension to life. But theirs was a quiet campaign, and Chiarelli was outspoken in his demand for thorough change, for a new drama. He declared, for example, that we get the same drama over and over, and he described it thus:

> There are a few persons, three or four. Then there is a family matter or some other commonplace. The First Act gives us a few conversations closing with some words full of uncertainty. In the Second Act, this uncertainty crystalizes in a conflict pushed to exasperation with a final cry or sigh, or some other personal muttering. And in the Third Act this pain begins to dissolve languidly like a piece of butter in a casserole. . . . And all this, of course, is wrought with attentive and scrupulous attention to details. . . . but also with the complete absence of that indefinite quality that is essential to a work of art, that indefinite quality which is the mystery of authentic reality . . . and which is the mark of the illogical rule of life. In short, it is the absence of poetry. . .

In place of the old Naturalism, Chiarelli urged what he called "heroic farce" (akin to Pirandello's term "transcendental farce"), which he saw possible because in human affairs great striving toward an ideal, done with extreme energy and with disdain for danger, can make tragedy and farce equally heroic. In this same spirit, Pirandello wrote in 1921, both in his preface to the new edition of The Late Mattia Pascal and in a speech he gave to the Father in

Six Characters in Search of an Author, that life is full of infinite absurdities that do not have to appear realistic simply because they are real. "Life is full of grotesque accidents."

The Theatre of the Grotesque may be seen also as an extension of the Crepuscular movement in poetry. The Crepuscular, or twilight, poets reacted against Naturalism and the heroics of d'Annunzio with a tone of quiet resignation, looking for poetry in prosaic things, singing of thwarted flights, of resignation to mediocrity, of the significance of the insignificant. To quote Silvio d'Amico, "They crooned in muted voice the poetry of the grey courtyard in the gloom and rain, of the abandoned convent and the accursed fountain." Like the Crepusculars, the Grotesques dwelt on the weight of the prosaic and mundane, but also went beyond them to suggest how this weight served to break down the elaborate self-constructions we all seek to impose on life. In this vein, there is a spiritual kinship between this movement and the French Theatre of Silence, or Théâtre de l'Inesprimé, of the late teens and the twenties, as practiced by such men as Jean Jacques Bernard and Charles Vildrac. In Italy, such playwrights as Sem Benelli (with his play The Bookworm, Tignola) or Fausto Maria Martini participated in adapting the crepuscular to the theatre. Both portrayed life as a gray mass of prosaic details that lend weight to a spirit of melancholy and loss.

The first World War and its disillusioning aftermath served to twist the crepuscular into the grotesque. The phenomenon is not isolated to Italy. It can be found in the German theatre in the early work of Bertold Brecht and in the work of Frank Wedekind and other so-called German "Neo-romantics". It can be found in Russia, such as the plays of illusion and reality of Nicolai Evreinov and Andreyev. Still, the spirit is strongest in Italy, perhaps because the Italian victory in the war was such a grotesque disaster.

The grotesque vision in Italy tended to entail the manipulation of three distinct realms as it was translated into theatrical terms, intended to create

a "humoristic" sensation in the minds of audiences. These three I shall call the "marionette syndrome", the "mirror syndrome", and the "multiple reality syndrome".. These are all syndromes in the sense that they all are conditions of the mind that the playwright infuses into his stage action and into the impressions he shapes. The three are aptly and pithily expressed in the titles of three of the grotesques: for the marionette syndrome, Rosso di San Secondo's Oh Marionettes, What Passion!, for the mirror syndrome, Luigi Antonelli's The Man Who Met Himself, and for the multiple reality syndrome, Luigi Pirandello's Right You Are (If You Think You Are). Naturally, all three syndromes enter into grotesque plays in some combination. They are closely intertwined. Nevertheless they are sufficiently distinct one from the others to allow for separate treatments.

The first of these, the "marionette syndrome", refers to the impression that the characters are themselves puppets whose strings are manipulated by forces beyond themselves, or at least beyond their conscious will. Still, they suffer inwardly and genuinely. Implicit in the idea of human existence as puppet existence is a double consciousness on the part of the characters. As puppets, the characters are carried into acts they would not commit of their own will. They find themselves in situations that they would never have arranged themselves, carried along on the tide of the life force as flotsam and jetsam. Nevertheless, they are also human puppets, and so aware that they are being manipulated. They feel the pull of the strings, and they resist it. They can see, as if by double sight, the surprising absurdity of the situations into which they are thrust. That consciousness provokes a sense of pain, ill-ease, and it is, of course, strongly related to the "mirror syndrome", as these characters see themselves.

Perhaps the clearest use of the "marionette syndrome" is to be found in Rosso di San Secondo's play, Oh Marionettes, What Passion! The three major

characters in the play, the Gentleman in Gray, the Gentleman in Mourning, and the Lady in the Blue Fox, are abstractions, anonymous victims of the power of an impersonal passion that runs rampant through their lives. They have no names and they take their identity from their clothes. Under the guise of extreme realism(strong enough that Andre Antoine admired the production extravagantly), Rosso creates a spectacle of blind, ruling instinct overpowering the most intense efforts of will. As Manlio Lo Vecchio Musti points out, his characters are frenetic, impulsive puppets being jerked on the string of their passions; the quality of the drama is rapid, dry and electric, and his dialogue is cut by long silences covering the ferment of ill-suppressed passion. Rosso added to his play a word of warning for his actors, a word that would be appropriate to any performing a Pinter play today:

> The actors should bear in mind that this is a play of desperate pauses. The words they speak veil an exasperation that cannot be assured (resa) except in knowing silence. Moreover, the arbitrariness that might seem to be in the drama, resulting from the torment the characters inflict on themselves, should not give rise to comedy, but rather to a feeling of tragic umorismo. Even though they suffer profoundly human pain, the three characters of the play are like marionettes, and their string is passion. And yet they are human: humans reduced to marionettes—and therefore profoundly pathetic.

In the case of Chiarelli's The Mask and the Face, the very idea of a contrast between mask and face is suggestive of the duality of human and puppet. The mask which Paolo in that play attempts to present to the world results from his human consciousness of himself, as he tries desperately to create a consistent and awesome stance to present to the society around him. The face, however, is his puppet side, uncontrollable, instinctual, but frighteningly true. Still, Chiarelli's version of the puppet syndrome is far from the bleak and horrifying vision of Rosso. Chiarelli's play is more of a social grotesque, and relatively Rosso's is an existential grotesque. While Rosso's characters reveal themselves as victims of their very condition as humans, Chiarelli's are more the victims of absurd social pressures. The Mask and the Face begins as a normal, well-made

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drawing-room comedy about a love triangle, but it soon twists into a portrayal of social posturing completely at odds with drives and desires of the characters. Paolo throws himself into a ridiculous circumstance by his declaration to his circle of friends that any man who discovers his wife unfaithful should forthwith kill her. Naturally he soon discovers his own wife, Savina, unfaithful. They agree that she should go away, leaving him behind to pretend having carried out his dictum. His pretense has to be an elaborate construction, met with equally elaborate constructions by the society around him: he is brought to trial, acquitted on grounds that his wife's behavior was so heinous he was justified, then he is lionized and adored as an awesome, consistent, admirable man. His puppet-human side, however, cannot be suppressed indefinitely. At the end he throws off his mask and flees with his wife.

The mirror syndrome emerges from the stunning awareness that may strike any character upon suddenly seeing himself from a vantage point outside himself. Much of what we might take to be normal, logical, and reasonable in the course of life may suddenly appear bizarre, absurd and irrational when seen from outside. A man, once placed by others or himself in an absurd or abnormal situation, endures it until he no longer recognizes it; if he does recognize it again, he will either run from it in horror, or he will create a mask to live behind, suffering a sense of martyrdom. One day, however, his life spirit within will be prodded to action, rebellion will erupt, and under the mask the face reasserts itself. The grotesque playwrights devised a wide array of circumstances that could thrust the character into that devastating recognition. This is the "mirror syndrome".

The above description fits Chiarelli's The Mask and the Face as well as any of the grotesques. From the moment that Paolo is acquitted of the murder of his wife and returns home to find it filled with flowers and congratulatory telegrams and billet-doux from female admirers, he experiences this recognition.

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He sees himself in the distorted image thrown back by society and his circle of friends. He suffers under the glare of that image, so out of joint with his own sense of himself. He is indeed a man caught in a house of mirrors.

Other playwrights use similar devices. Rosso, for example peoples his play, Oh Marionettes, What Passions' with onlookers who reflect an image of the three central characters as they respond to their own passions and so force them to see themselves as the absurd puppets they are. Luigi Anonelli in The Man Who Met Himself, uses the more blatant device of taking his character Luciano de Garbines to an enchanted isle where a certain Dr. Climt conjures up Luciano's former self of twenty years earlier. The older Luciano thus can see all the absurdity of his own younger life, but cannot fully persuade the younger Luciano to see it. Another blatant device is to be found in Enrico Cavacchioli's She Who Resembles You, where the characters are confronted with a puppet form that re-enacts the actions they had just completed.

The multiple reality syndrome refers to the sensation of two or more planes of reality that appear mutually exclusive but which exist simultaneously. The mirror syndrome often serves to promote this sensation, as a character meets the plane of reality of his image. By the same token, the marionette syndrome with its double consciousness also tends to create multiple realities. Perhaps some of the more remarkable instances of the syndrome are to be found in The Mask and The Face, which in so many ways epitomized the movement at its very outset. Choice lines from the play suggest vividly the dual reality of Paolo's face and his mask. Having created the fiction that he had killed his wife, the town takes it for true and thrusts him and Savina into very real circumstances based on the lie. Shortly after Paolo has "killed" her, she overhears him discussing his court defense with her lover, the lawyer Luciano. Luciano declares that the best defense would be based on the shamelessness of Paolo's wife: "I have only been dead an hour, and already my lover calls me a shameless woman." Later,

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she returns from her banishment just in time to witness her funeral. Paolo himself cannot reconcile himself to the reality of his new found glory as a champion of husband's rights; he is horrified by it, and he struggles mightily to find a way to ease his discomfort and adapt to the new realm. Failing that he rebels, proclaims the truth only to find that the town is now ready to prosecute him for tampering with justice. He ends by having to flee the new reality so inconsistent with his own.

Another example might be What You'd Least Expect by Arnaldo Fraccaroli and Luigi Barzini, wherein a Count, taken with ennui and boredom, finds himself immersed in the activities of a movie company creating their own reality. He persuades them to include him in various filming sequences, and he ends up taking thieves in his home for actors, and suspecting that he himself may be an actor pretending to be a Count. In the case of Fausto Maria Martini's The Other Nanetta, wherein Nanetta's husband writes a novel about her, and she becomes entrapped between herself and that other Nanetta.

All of these syndromes and their accompanying devices are recognizeably Pirandellian. Luigi Pirandello managed to create a much more thorough synthesis of these tendencies by way of a more revolutionary and thought-out dramaturgy. His work is based upon a profound world vision that the other grotesque playwrights had only glimpsed. Frequently, the grotesque playwrights descended to sheer gimmickry, such as Antonelli's magical isle where a man might literally meet himself, or Alberto Casella's notion of Death taking a holiday, or Cavacchioli's omni-present skeletal abstraction named "Him" to conduct his play Bird of Paradise, or Massimo Bontempelli's notion of a woman who changes character with her clothes in his Our Dea.

Nevertheless, the movement did produce some highly worthwhile plays, probably the best of which are The Mask and The Face and Oh Marionettes, What Passion!. Their playwrights, Luigi Chiarelli and Rosso di San Secondo, were unfortunately

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unable to sustain their grotesque view into other equally valuable plays. Chiarelli wrote several others, such as The Silken Staircase, but eventually turned to other styles, particularly his so-called "Magical Theatre", consisting of myth, anachronism, and automatic writing. Rosso also wrote others, such as The Sleeping Beauty, but he gradually became too involved in promoting self-consciously his personal, overly elaborated philosophy.

In some respects the Theatre of the Grotesque was a failure. It could not quite rise to meet itself. Like many movements in the arts in the present century, the Theatre of the Grotesque was more compelling for its program than for its works. On the other hand, it was scarcely conducted in vain. Ironically, it was largely inspired by Pirandello the novelist and theorist, but served to encourage Pirandello the dramatist. Moreover, it moved the Italian theatre into new directions. This rejuvenating effect was strong enough to lead Manlio Lo Vecchio Musti to declare in 1942:

> After three centuries, the grotesque movement has enabled Italy to re-acquire its theatrical pre-eminence that it had lost with the passing of the Renaissance.

Others may not have been quite so enthusiastic, but most critics are agreed that the movement had a highly salutary effect. Adriano Tilgher regarded the movement with a jaundiced eye, but he also saw in it enormous potential. In summing it up he remarked:

> If the Theatre of the Grotesque has no other merit than having reminded us that it is vain to hope for a renewed theatre until such time as it decides to take a bath of thought and philosophy, then the Grotesque will not have existed in vain.

Perhaps we may say that the theatre has taken Tilgher's prescribed bath. In any event, the grotesque syndromes have continued and have become enriched in the existentialist and absurdist drama that was to follow. Pirandello had been the first to discover the richness and signficance of the syndromes, and he has been followed by a host of others. Such apparently diverse contemporary plays as Pinter's Old Times, or Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,

or Guare's House of Blue Leaves, share grotesque elements and devices. Even their titles sound like grotesques.